



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release to PM's on MONDAY, JULY 25, 1949

MUSK OXEN HERD IN ALASKA SHOWS SATISFACTORY INCREASE

The only musk oxen herd in Alaska, located on the Nunivak Island National Wildlife Refuge, is now "increasing satisfactorily, considering the low breeding potentialities of these animals," reports the Fish and Wildlife Service.

An aerial survey of Nunivak Island made by David Spencer, manager of the Kenai National Moose Range, between June 16 and 20 reveals that the herd now numbers 65, including 8 calves. A thorough reconnaissance in 1948 located 55 animals on the island, of which 6 were calves. The herd has experienced several setbacks in the past, principally during the war years when military activities interfered with the proper protection and management of the animals.

Musk oxen practically disappeared from Alaska more than a century ago as the result of indiscriminate killing by explorers, traders, and natives. In April 1927 the Territorial Legislature, in a memorial to Congress, urged an appropriation for reestablishing musk oxen in Alaska. In 1930, when these funds became available, the former Bureau of Biological Survey undertook the job of reintroducing a game animal into its ancient habitat.

The musk oxen for this transplant were obtained from Greenland and travelled 14,000 miles to their new home in Alaska. From 1930 to 1935 they were kept at the College Experimental Farm, Fairbanks, for the purpose of studying the possibilities of domestication and utilization of the animals, with the idea of making greater economic use of the areas north of timberline.

The results of the experiments to domesticate the musk oxen while in captivity were unsatisfactory so arrangements were made to transfer the entire herd to the Nunivak Refuge. The Island affords the animals an area of more than a million acres over which they are free to range. Because the musk oxen are inclined to be vicious and unpredictable, the natives on the island avoid them.

After years of study the Service has concluded that because of their habits, range requirements, and slowness of reproduction, it is impracticable to raise musk oxen as a farming or commercial enterprise. The animals do not breed until 4 or 5 years old and generally the cows breed only in alternate years after reaching that age. The musk oxen is an Arctic animal and does not thrive in a temperate climate. Its wool cannot be gathered in the same manner as sheep wool since clipping, aside from the trouble in handling so dangerous a beast, subjects the animal to pneumonia. Although the flesh of the musk oxen is edible, most people would prefer beef or mutton.

The Service states that at the present time there are not sufficient animals available in Alaska to warrant their removal for experimentation or attempts to build up herds at other locations.

x x x